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Young, Victoria M. 2014. *Saint John's Abbey Church: Marcel Breuer and the Creation of a Modern Sacred Space*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Reviewed by Robert Proctor.

A clearing in a forest wedged between chilly lakes in rural Minnesota seems an unlikely place for one of the major international landmarks in the development of Roman Catholic architecture, art and liturgy in the twentieth century. It was here that the world's largest Benedictine monastery established itself as a centre of liturgical and artistic reform. Tapping into its European heritage and monastic networks, St John's Abbey, Collegeville made significant contributions to international debates over liturgical action, space and modern art – and fixed its influence firmly on the Church through its role in the Second Vatican Council. Victoria Young's book on the Abbey Church could have been two or three times the size if it had aimed to stitch this building thoroughly into the global context of post-war Catholic culture and religion, but she deftly reveals the main threads of its institutional connections and equips the scholarly reader to trace them further.

The Abbey's links to German congregations would seem to be the key to its special role: its first foundation in Minnesota in 1856 was a mission to cater for the spiritual and educational welfare of German settlers, and its first substantial church, consecrated in 1882, looked to models already established in Bavaria with colonial identity in mind for its architectural and decorative forms, also evoking Romanesque Benedictine abbey churches such as Maria Laach. When Maria Laach itself became a centre of the liturgical movement in the early twentieth century, the monks of St John's were quick to follow, many having studied together with their German brothers in Rome. Young provides a lively account of

the liturgical movement as viewed from the perspective of Minnesota: Virgil Michel of St John's was tasked with a study trip in 1924, to Rome to meet Lambert Beauduin, a Benedictine whose work on liturgy Michel would translate and publish on his return, and to acquaint himself with Maria Laach, home to an ambitious programme of conferences and publications and innovative liturgical practices under its abbot, Ildefons Herwegen. St John's became an American equivalent. The realization soon came that a new form of church space must result from the new understanding of the Mass as the central prayer of the gathered Church constituting the 'Mystical Body' of Christ, a liturgical theology explored by Odo Casel of Maria Laach. It is hardly surprising that one of the twelve architects invited to compete for the commission in 1953 was Rudolf Schwarz of Cologne, who had been involved in the liturgical movement in Germany for several decades and whose book of 1938 *Vom Bau Der Kirche* (later translated as *The Church Incarnate: The Sacred Function of Christian Architecture*) gave a visually arresting and poetic argument for a modern liturgical church architecture. Young tells us, however, that an American architect was always envisaged, and the choice of Bauhaus-educated Marcel Breuer, who was not religious and had not designed any churches, was less an act of bravery than of pragmatism. But Breuer's commitment to an expressive modernism was ideally suited to the monks' demands. A rigorous analysis of functions, through which Young leads us with the aid of Breuer's annotations on his assistants' drawings, led to a broad, open trapezium-shaped space organized by what she terms a 'spiritual axis', while Breuer's love of daring reinforced-concrete structure, engineered with the assistance of Pier Luigi Nervi, gave a powerful sense of sacred monumentality.

St John's Abbey church not only drew from the new theology of liturgy but contributed to liturgical development in turn when Godfrey Dickmann, who edited the

Abbey's journal, *Worship*, was called to Rome to work on the Second Vatican Council's documents on the liturgy. The 1963 'Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy' and the following year's document on its implementation included passages on art and architecture that reflected his involvement in the great project at Collegeville. Young shows how Diekmann arrived at the unprecedented idea of 'communion tables' to replace the traditional communion rail at which the laity received the Eucharist; and notes that the Abbey was one of the locations where concelebration – the celebration of a single Mass by several priests together – was trialed in 1964 before its official approval, which made the Abbey church's multitude of individual crypt chapels redundant. The prominence of the baptistery in the church is explored by Young in largely symbolic terms, but also had a liturgical purpose: the first significant reforms of the liturgy to encourage the 'active participation' of worshippers took place under Pope Pius XII before Vatican II, just at the moment the Abbey church was in its design phases, and affected the Easter ceremonies, particularly the Easter Vigil, which in 1956 was reformed to become an extended theatrical drama played out across the space of the church, including the ritual blessing of water at the font. St John's was clearly a testing ground for new liturgical rites and the new forms of space that could accommodate them and give them expressive meaning. Similarly the monks undertook an adventurous campaign of artistic embellishment, largely under the direction of a consultant, Frank Kacmarcik. Young's detailed analysis of this program amply confirms Colleen McDannell's thesis in *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* on the gendering of artworks as masculine. This attribution was viewed as essential for liturgical art as opposed to sentimental devotional kitsch, and was a distinction that followed from Romano Guardini's influential book *The Spirit of the Liturgy* in the early twentieth century.

The centrality of St John's Abbey Church in the twentieth-century realization of modern forms of church architecture becomes evident through this correspondingly important book, and Young's meticulous and engaging account allows it to be fully assessed historically for the first time.